

## University of Dundee

### Identity-in-the-work and musicians' struggles

Beech, Nic; Gilmore, Charlotte; Hibbert, Paul; Ybema, Sierk

*Published in:*  
Work, Employment and Society

*DOI:*  
[10.1177/0950017015620767](https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017015620767)

*Publication date:*  
2016

*Licence:*  
CC BY

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Beech, N., Gilmore, C., Hibbert, P., & Ybema, S. (2016). Identity-in-the-work and musicians' struggles: the production of self-questioning identity work. *Work, Employment and Society*, 30(3), 506-522.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017015620767>

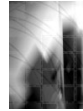
#### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in Discovery Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from Discovery Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

#### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



# Identity-in-the-work and musicians' struggles: the production of self-questioning identity work

Work, employment and society  
2016, Vol. 30(3) 506–522  
© The Author(s) 2016



Reprints and permissions:  
[sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav](http://sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav)  
DOI: 10.1177/0950017015620767  
[wes.sagepub.com](http://wes.sagepub.com)



**Nic Beech**

University of Dundee, UK

**Charlotte Gilmore**

University of Edinburgh, UK

**Paul Hibbert**

University of St Andrews, UK

**Sierk Ybema**

VU University Amsterdam, the Netherlands

## Abstract

Identity work is widely regarded as a process through which people strive to establish, maintain or restore a coherent and consistent sense of self. In the face of potential disruptions of, or threats to, their identities, people seek to salvage their sense of self by resolving tensions and restoring consistency. In contrast to the current identity work literature, this research indicates that identity work is not always about seeking resolution and moving on, but sometimes about continuing struggles which do not achieve a secure sense of self. This article seeks to elaborate the understanding of unresolved identity work by exploring three contexts of the everyday practice of indie musicians. An analysis of how they struggle to construct acceptable versions of their selves as songwriter, bandleader and front(wo)man allows us to develop the conceptualization of self-questioning (as opposed to self-affirmative, resolution-oriented) identity work.

## Keywords

creative industries, identity work, musicians, struggles, tensions

---

## Corresponding author:

Nic Beech, University of Dundee, Nethergate, Dundee DD1 4HN, UK.

Email: [p.n.h.beech@dundee.ac.uk](mailto:p.n.h.beech@dundee.ac.uk)

Identity work has usually been associated with people seeking to ‘solve’ a ‘problem’, a process in which they ‘are continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions’ of their selves which produce a sense of ‘coherence and distinctiveness’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 626). From this viewpoint, people are thus seen as continuously working towards a sense of self that is clear, coherent and distinctive (Watson, 2009). Working from this assumption, a considerable body of literature on identity work has been established, expanding our understanding of how organizational actors’ search for the resolution of tensions to secure their identity claims (Alvesson, 2010; Brown, 2015). There are as Ybema et al. (2009: 312) point out, ‘few empirical studies that privilege the potential analytical purchase and subtleties of indecisive, insecure, critical, self-depreciative identity talk’. Some studies do show, for example, how organizational actors resist an unwanted identity that is attributed to them or claim an identity over which they have a tenuous grasp, thus exploring difficulties such as pressures to conform to a corporate self (Costas and Fleming, 2009) and inbetween or ‘liminal’ identities (Beech, 2011; Ellis and Ybema, 2010). Yet, while bringing into view tensions and struggles, the focus in these studies remains on organizational actors’ solutions: their ‘tensile positioning’ (Ellis and Ybema, 2010: 279); or their preservation of an ‘authentic’ self (Costas and Fleming, 2009). This article shows instead, not only how organizational actors encounter identity-provoking situations and ‘forestall closure on their identity’ (Ellis and Ybema, 2010: 279), but also how they do not always seek to arrive at an answer or strive for resolution in the face of disturbing tensions, but engage in ‘self-questioning’ rather than ‘self-affirming’ identity work.

One area of work which may be particularly fruitful for such investigation is the creative industries. McKinlay and Smith (2009), for example, have shown the tensions which can exist between workers who self-identify as ‘creatives’ and organizational pressures for them to efficiently produce goods or services which meet commercial demands. Conforming to these demands may constitute a challenge to self-identity when workers have to reproduce work outcomes with minimal divergence from expectations. In such circumstances actors may recognize that, whatever their aspirations, what they produce is not especially creative and in some cases this produces a struggle or resistance (Gotsi et al., 2010). Accepting that such tensions exist, our interest is in understanding how tensions and struggles operate in a dynamic of work practices and identity struggles. We analyse musicians who experience and express struggles in their day-to-day life and work. Although the literature often sees struggles as transitory and teleological, that is, as a step towards resolution (Alvesson, 2010), in our case the struggles appeared to be unresolved over time. In addition, unlike other findings in the creative industries where the struggle appeared to be with something external in the social context (Gotsi et al., 2010) such as ‘the company’ or the demands of clients (Elsbach, 2009), in our case the very struggles appeared to be intrinsic to the identity and practice of the musicians. Thus the focus of our study was triggered by a surprise in our empirical engagement in the field (see Hibbert et al., 2014). Accordingly, we are concerned with developing an understanding from the ‘ground up’ of the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of these persistent struggles.

## Self-questioning identity work

Studies of identity work have shown that individuals often find themselves struggling, for instance when worker identities are outside 'the norm', such as of internet game workers (Lee and Lin, 2011) or exotic dancers (Wesley, 2002) when there can be a distancing from the work-identity. Identity work can be heightened in response to social pressures or personal demands that drive people in, for instance, undesired directions (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) or simultaneously pull them in multiple directions (Ellis and Ybema, 2010). These pressures and demands may spark 'self-doubt and self-openness' (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1165) and unlock feelings of stress, anxiety or shame as one's sense of 'being myself' becomes unsettled, threatened or socially 'invalidated' (Beech, 2011; Ellis and Ybema, 2010; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Subject to both social pressures and doubts, moments of instability in identity formation are therefore common, and research has documented fragmented and fragile identities (Collinson, 2003) and individuals involved in intense work on their identities. However, as Brown (2015) points out, even though identity scholars increasingly theorize identities as fragmented and fragile, they may nevertheless maintain that, overall, 'identity work is undertaken in pursuit of coherent identities' (Brown, 2015: 27) or assume that people deploy contradictory identities as 'long-term solutions that enable people to cope effectively with ambiguous and inconsistent demands' (Brown, 2015: 28).

Usually, identity work is seen as an attempt to come to terms with impositions or threats to identity, such as disruptive 'events, encounters, transitions and surprises, as well as more constant strains' (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1165). In the face of everyday instability, managerial pressure to conform (Alvesson, 2010) or any other threat to their sense of self, people struggle to come to terms with their sense of self and to re-secure a fragile and fragmented self. Identity work is then conceived as being directed towards establishing, maintaining or restoring a sense of self as a natural response to a threat. Alvesson (2010), for example, sees 'strugglers' as being *en route* to firmer identity positioning. For Watson (2008: 129; see also 2009: 431) striving to achieve 'a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity' is the essence of identity work. Coherence and distinctiveness figure prominently in definitions of narrative identity or identity work (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Ezzy, 1998). In line with this view, empirical studies of identity work in organization studies suggest, for instance, that individuals appropriate resources through which the self can be labelled (Musson and Duberley, 2007), a sense of self-clarity can be created and unwelcome identity-attributions can be warded off (Costas and Fleming, 2009; Kreiner et al., 2006). In identity studies, struggle is thus conceived as a passing phase, a way station on the road to an effectively constructed understanding of one's self. Identity studies thus tend to cast light on individuals' *solutions* rather than the struggle itself, presenting identity struggles as a transitory, teleological process that ultimately seeks to shore up, restore and secure an individual's sense of self. It is 'struggling-to-come-up' rather than 'struggling-to-stay-afloat'.

The neglect of incoherence, insecurity and indistinctiveness in studies of identity is perhaps symptomatic of identity researchers' interpretations consistently favouring 'the

type of dichotomous analytical paradigms associated with modernist conceptions of a unified self' (Hartman, 2015: 22). We show how, in contrast, some actors' self-questioning 'neither honours nor forgives' (as Dylan puts it (Dylan, 1983)) and neither aims for nor achieves redemption or resolution. The indie musicians in our study invest so much of their sense of self into their work (something we refer to as identity-in-the-work) and are both desirous and fearful and sometimes repelled by what it means to be a songwriter, bandleader and front(wo)man; they fall into self-doubt and deliberately step into self-critique in these processes. However unpleasant, frustrating and infuriating at times, for their sense of who they are the struggle is essential, not the outcome. It is this discord in indie musicians' identity construction that we aim to record in this article.

## Identity struggles in creative contexts

The professional music industry provides a particularly appropriate setting for exploring identity struggles. For example, for those who produce creative work, there is often a tension between the opposing demands of commercial utility and aesthetic standards (Coulson, 2012) that can be played out at the level of identity. In such situations, creative workers may find ways of resolving or accommodating their identity tensions through activities such as secret acts of rebellion (Elsbach, 2009), compliance with, and pragmatic integration of, both aesthetic and commercial orientations in self-identity (Gotsi et al., 2010) or denial of the reality of externally imposed aspects of their identity (Costas and Fleming, 2009). The direction of identity work to resolve the art-commerce tension is often implicitly a moral one: art being regarded as good while commerce is bad. Hence, the artist not producing what the client may want is following a heroic self-narrative (Bain, 2005) in which a commercially compromised self is refurbished as a rebellious artistic self.

Matters are perhaps even more complex in the music industry. Uncertainty, mobility, self-employment and project work epitomize the industry, where success can be ephemeral (Montuori, 2003). In the case of indie (independent, deliberately 'alternative' and non-mainstream) musicians, value is placed on the quality of their art, which is perceived to depend on autonomy and artist-led approaches to production (Fonarow, 2006). Honesty and self-exposure in song writing and being alternative to the mainstream, or being 'authentic', are part of what it means to be an indie musician. However, the need to expose and promote the self (for example by elaborate solo playing) exists alongside the need to cooperate in a band (Humphreys et al., 2003). Thus as an expressive activity in which identity is on display to others, being a musician may be regarded as a project of self (Grey, 1998). As the findings will show, self-questioning is at the heart of this project and we will argue that this particular form of identity work occurs when particular work/social contexts relate to a significant presence of the self in the work product or 'identity-in-the-work'.

Although one might perhaps expect studies of professional musicians to explore self-questioning identity work, existing research tends to describe self-affirmative, resolution-oriented identity work in this context. We believe this misses important phenomena; for the indie musicians in our study, the identity work is rooted in the persistence of the struggle itself. Therefore this study is oriented around two questions: what kinds of

identity work are going on in the process of self-questioning, and how does this identity work relate to the work practices and context? In addressing these questions, the article seeks to contribute to the understanding of self-questioning identity work in general and, more specifically, of the nature of 'artistic identities' (Bain, 2005) and the tensions associated with work in the creative industries (Coulson, 2012).

## **The current study context**

The study considers musicians' working lives and practices which include song writing, being part of a band, performing their music, arranging tours, promoting recordings and events and so forth. The study includes observations of 52 events (such as rehearsals, sound checks and gigs) and interviews with 95 musicians, 53 backstage workers such as engineers and managers, and 177 audience members. The observations took place in three European cities and included both normal gigs and three major festivals. Access was arranged to venues during the daytime when gigs were being set up and in green rooms and catering areas used by musicians and others. During performances researchers joined the audiences and sometimes stood with the sound engineers or backstage. Afterwards, research continued in the backstage area and so included considerable access to informal talk, camaraderie and observation of both performance-work and performance-surrounding activities. Detailed field notes were taken during these observations. Audience interviews were conducted in two ways: one-to-one interviews informally at gigs, which were between 10 and 30 minutes; second, through focus groups at the festivals which lasted around an hour. These were arranged by the festival managers and normally consisted of 'friends of the festival'; that is, groups who had a sustained interest in the music genre and the festival.

In the data presented below, the interviews with musicians were an important source. Initial access was through gig and festival managers who enabled interviews with the musicians performing at the event. Beyond this, a snowballing approach (Platman, 2004) in which participants suggested others who would be interested in the issues discussed was employed. A combination of 'life history' (see Coulson, 2012) and practice-oriented (Blackler et al., 2000) interviews were used. The life history section was based around a topic guide, which included questions about: the musicians' childhood, family, early interests and education; their 'discovery' of music; and the organization and management of their bands. The focus on everyday practices (Blackler et al., 2000) included questions on: the people involved, what was done, how physical space and technologies and other resources were used, how activities progressed and what they thought was of value in what they did. All interviews were recorded and supplementary notes were taken throughout the interviews. Interviews ranged from an hour to just over three hours.

A grounded approach to analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Denzin, 1978) was employed. The initial coding used data categories to gather similar examples from across the data set. As the study became more focused on identity tensions and struggles, the second stage of interpretation compared emerging ideas from the data with concepts from identity work literature, such that each was used to inform understandings of the other (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012). Identity was studied not as an objective fact or an individual's or collective's deeper essence, but instead as being constituted through the

ways in which people present their 'selves' when explaining who they are to themselves and to others. From such a theoretical vantage point, the formation of 'an identity' can be viewed as a constant interplay between social influence ('who they want me to be') and self-definition ('who I am or want to be').

In order to protect the musicians' anonymity in the presentation of the insights from the data pseudonyms are used throughout and references to particular times and places are removed.

## Identity tensions in being a musician

It is a love–hate relationship being a musician ... for me singing my songs was like getting a massage ... but writing songs, creating a band, attracting an audience, and never being able to 'switch off' from that was a challenge ... but I have to do it ... even in my sleep I am thinking about it, I am like, fuck ... [exasperated look]. (Lola)

Indie musicians seem literally to have to work hard on their sense of self, engage in a 'constant struggle you have with yourself' (Milly), poised between the 'massage' and the 'challenge' of being a songwriter, bandleader and live performer. In order to interpret the data, we developed a series of categories. After various initial versions, we used the category of work activity as an organizing idea. The three categories we use are: solo song writing; arranging and practising with a band; and public performance with the band. Other, finer grained, categories could be used but these captured the main features of identity work.

## Solo song writing

The indie songwriters described the heart of song writing as delving into one's inner feelings and expressing 'something of yourself'. As David noted: '[e]very act of writing a song should be giving your soul.' Many of their songs were highly personal. They included political message songs, songs of love and loss, songs of desolation and confusion and sometimes story songs. The personal nature of the indie musicians' lyrics meant that their song writing was a very private practice, yet was producing something that would be public. Apart from the risk of exposing themselves through their songs, the indie songwriters all pointed out that writing songs itself was not a trouble-free process. For Annie, a song she wrote documented her struggles to free herself from depression:

[The song] was about a bird ... It is not like 'my lovely bird'; it is freedom flying, and a little bit about using that metaphorically. It is not really to fly, just more about being free ... About two months before we went down to do the record, I was diagnosed with depression which made a lot of sense. I probably had been for a little while, but nobody had labelled it before, and so a lot of the record was about that. That was stressful.

Although they found it painful, for some writing a song was necessarily an unhappy struggle, as here with Lucy: 'I have to be in a dark place, I have to be in a certain state of mind before I can have enough clarity to write down my feelings in lyrics and what I really think about them.' The songwriters would deliberately put themselves into emotional

situations, because that is where they were able to write. Hence, a key struggle was both desiring and fearing to be in the dark place.

Archie: As a songwriter ... I will do things like put myself in the worst possible situation to make things really painful for myself ... but I can be really quite down and I can be the opposite: so high, I cannot sleep for three days.

I: Do you write songs in those extremes?

A: Yes, I think that is the only place I can ... It would always be when I would be in a more heightened state [of real pain] ... captured in the notes, the rhythm, and in the sound. And I guess that has always been my kind of obsession ... but it is always a struggle ...

The writing of a song thus involved 'making things painful'. Casting themselves as the victims of their own artistic endeavours, they are bound to be stuck in an unpleasant position. As Lola put it: '[m]y song writing would go down the tube, if I ever became happy.'

Usually, the end result of the process was itself no less painful. The aspiration to write a good song and the inherent drive for perfection was associated with feelings of inevitable transience and imperfections. Their fate was trying to be, but never actually being able to be, the person that wrote the perfect song. It was a fate of their own choosing:

I wanted to do something that I could almost never find the solution to. And that is what I am doing now, trying to perfect something that cannot be perfected, so it lasts your whole life ... It is an actual necessity for me. (Lionel)

The 'why' of this persistent struggle in identity work is the perception that authentic creativity is never fully achievable, and thus there is no comfortable resolution. Instead, the artists' identity work is oriented towards *critical questions* and self-provocations that cannot be resolved. The 'how' is a set of processes of engagement with the pain of making authentic art, and, at best, 'failing less'. That is, the indie songwriters' reflections on who they were as songwriters thus illustrated several processes that contributed to identity work: *expressing difficult emotions*, such as Annie's exploration of depression; *reaching into 'uncomfortable' parts of the self*, such as 'having to go to that dark place'; and *striving (and failing) for perfectly authentic creativity*.

## Arranging and practising with a band

Once a song is written, the indie musicians move to a new creative workspace: the band. In working with the band tension surfaced between individually and collectively oriented identity work. On the one hand, singer-songwriters downplayed their individual selfhood by expressing a strong identification with the band: 'I don't know who I am, except Fancy Footwork' (Archie). Quite often, the band's musical outcome would be beyond their individual control, because they were reliant on other band members to create the instrumental contributions. Yet, on the other hand, there was also a strong individualistic streak in the singer-songwriters' accounts of the music-making process in the band and the band's musical identity. Many of them indicated they tended or attempted to exert strong, if not dictatorial, control over the process and had to learn how to work as a band:



When I started the band I was more of a dictator, I think, because I always felt a wee bit superior. I always felt I knew a bit better than everybody, and, as a songwriter, I had this vision of this band. I pissed a lot of people off ... Certainly, music was a lonely hobby/pursuit for years and I think that is why it took me years to learn how to be in a band, and how to appreciate it and use it. (Martin)

Many of the singer-songwriters were close to their band-mates and had developed relationships which provided a safe context to 'try anything'. Yet, they continued to be worried about their need for 'teamwork' and the musical input of others, and about a loss of artistic control and purity. This can become intensely personal as the sound, style and words are all part of expressing identity-in-the-work. For example, Archie told us about his lead guitarist Sean who, in his eyes, refused to respect Archie's rights as the writer of the song. He reclaimed his position as bandleader by dismissing Sean: '[t]his is *my* form of expression. Other people may take a part in it ... and contribute ... But it couldn't be Sean's form of expression. So he had to go, and I regret that in many ways.'

Band members' accounts of their own role in the creative process of making music in a band mirror the singer-songwriters' concerns, addressing the same questions: is the band's music an individual or a collective creation? Is the singer-songwriter's role as bandleader to be autocratic or democratic? This echoes the concerns of the singer-songwriters about the undesirability and yet necessity of 'dilution':

It sounds really bad, but teamwork ... I just thought, well ... things get diluted ... For so many years, I've thought that anyone else's major input on my music would mean it would not be the same. If anyone else touched it, I hate it. I hate it; if someone else did something to it ... but then I ... then I need to have respect for their musical sensibilities and the music they can bring to the Birthday Suits. (Lionel)

Some band members showed respect for the band's music ultimately being the bandleader's individual creation, while also underlining their own, significant albeit not always respected, contribution to the collective process. Despite the singer-songwriters' personal struggles and desire for purity and control, it seems that accommodating collaboration was essential to the realization or resolution of the work, even if this was a problematic notion for the bandleader:

Jim [bandleader] is somebody who does not have the ability to play guitar, piano or any musical instrument, but he does have this wonderful music soul, and this ability to express lovely things in music. And he requires good collaborators, although he doesn't like to think it ... but we must follow Jim's vision ... you recognize your roles and responsibilities in any group. (Louis)

Band members would in some cases undertake solo work away from bands, because they also struggled to retain an identity as a 'pure' artist despite the pressures of collaboration: 'I battle sometimes to remind myself that being creative sometimes will be good for my sanity' (Fred). Short of solo projects, many band members had 'signature' practices, such as a particular approach to solos, harmonizing or instrumental sound that was identified as theirs, that were also integral to the collaborative realization of the music.

The 'why' of the struggle in identity work in this process is thus the perceived need to continue the narrative exposition of a 'pure' self in contexts in which the (musical) 'signatures' of others are also inscribed in order to produce better art. This is an irresolvable tension, and the 'how' of identity work in this case involves processes that question and destabilize the self while providing for integration of the artistic work: *letting others have an authoring/editing role* in self-expression; *allowing for 'dilution'*; and *accepting collaboration* as a means of improving (resolving) the work, not the self. For these reasons, the indie musicians claimed to maintain a love-hate relationship with their bands. The singer-songwriters articulated a desire to be emotionally bonded and musically engaged with the band, as well as a fear of losing control. There was a tension between the band's arrangements, repertoire and reputation being a symbolic expression of the bandleader's individuality and the band as a collective. The realization and resolution of the artistic work was thus closely associated with self-questioning identity work.

## Public performance with the band

Being able to fill concert halls of certain sizes was part of the identity of being an indie musician, as opposed to being only a 'wannabe'. However, in addition to being a significant source of revenue, live performance produced new tensions. There was the continuing 'intrinsic' longing for an authentic self as a true artist who creates a personally meaningful piece of music without pre-emptively considering the audience reaction, and, contrastingly, the figure of an 'entertainer' who exercised musical craft for maximal audience satisfaction and 'extrinsic' financial reasons (Hoedemaekers and Ybema, 2015). Live performance particularly triggered tensions between on-stage and privately held identities. It was something that the musicians wanted, and had to do, if they were to be authentic musicians. Yet, it was also a fear-inducing activity:

It is the most terrifying and personal thing to do: to sing in front of people. That is really big, that is huge. There is nowhere to hide. (Fiona)

It is a contradiction ... People say: if you don't feel comfortable and you are nervous [performing on stage], why do you do it ...? I do it, because it is part of writing songs and making records ... (Florence)

I will not be able to eat after a certain time, like I have made myself extremely sick in the past. Not that I have had an eating disorder or anything ... There have been times where I have had to take huge amounts of drugs just to get me on the stage ... But it is frustrating, because it affects my ability to play the music and that is when it becomes annoying, because I know that I can do it, and then I get this stage fright thing where I cannot remember how to play. (Milly)

For some, there was a sense that the 'authentic' self expressed in song writing, already compromised by taking the song to the band, was then further 'diluted' in performance. Lionel talked about having different versions of his self:

I am a different person in the studio to the person I am on stage. In the studio, I am a perfectionist ... Inevitably things get diluted, although I resist strongly ... But on stage I have to accept that it is going to be a different performance every night ... I struggle to get used to that.

In spite of the 'dilution' of their songs, the singer-songwriters did want an affinity with the audience, and to be affirmed by their response. As Jim put it: '[w]e need the love, that's why we make ourselves do it'.

However, the musicians sought to distance themselves from the audience at the same time, to make the process of exposure and potential rejection somehow less risky. This distancing was made easier by playing to bigger audiences, because playing to a 10,000 crowd was not 'real', as described by Annie:

You are standing in front of that many people (10,000) – that is not really real. But when you are standing in front of 50 people in the Crow's Nest, they are right in your face and it *is* real, it is like a really, really scary thing. Especially if they are 50 people you know. It is a bit strange as well, because now that I am doing my own band and playing much smaller venues, it is a little bit like starting from scratch again.

For others the large crowds were in fact also 'real'. They found alternative ways to distance themselves from the crowd: '[n]ineteen nights on the trot in the Bonne Vivant in Paris which was about 17,000 to 18,000 per night and it scared the shit out of me ... It was compulsory to drink and smoke on stage' (David).

However, the fear of exposure was also associated with some quite explicit identity work. For example, many of the singer-songwriters identified themselves as being shy and needing what Lionel called his on-stage 'game face'. That is, a way of appearing which shielded him from the experience of performing – something like a 'poker face'. His on-stage persona brought in 'non-self' elements alien to his private self: 'I think there is a swaggering confidence that I don't have about me in day-to-day life.' However, he needed to avoid eye contact to preserve his performance:

They [the fans] are quite intense as well. I think it is because of the nature [of the songs]. The albums have been very personal, people have taken them into their own lives and attached them to their own scenarios that they are going through. And, as a result, they are really intensely attached. You can feel it and you can see it. The front couple of rows, girls and guys ... in tears a lot of the time. But I don't look at them, I look straight out that way [pointing just above the interviewer's head]. I cannot make eye contact ... Never made eye contact. (Lionel)

Thus the artists presented a narrative of self that functioned as a means of mediating their interaction with the audience and the degree of exposure, but it was still their own narrative that they presented. Despite such complex and seemingly protective identity work (which nevertheless raised questions about the artist's perception of self), the strong desire to be on stage and perform their songs still involved a considerable personal struggle:

I am having a panic attack ... I could not breathe, I could not get it together ... I just had to get it over and calm down and I was not calm when I went on and I remember like through the first,

second, third, fourth and fifth songs ... That was possibly the worst ever you know, because when we first started I would be nervous and there would be a nervousness throughout the gig but not as bad as that ... (Florence)

Wanda had similar experiences:

I usually have to be talked down off the ceiling before shows ... I am crucified by it sometimes. So that is a bit of a problem for me. I keep doing it though, and I always wonder why I am doing it? Why am I doing this? I hate this. (Wanda)

The 'why' of the struggle in identity work in this process is thus the perceived need to offer a mediating narrative of the self which is still 'owned', but allows the artist to feel less exposed to the experience of encountering the audience and its reactions to the performed musical work. Thus there is identity-in-the-work that is both real and unreal in the artists' accounts; the performance of the work is authentic at the same time that the authenticity of the artist is placed in question and perhaps even fragmented. Once again there is no overall resolution, as the terrible emotional suffering of the artists suggests. The 'how' of identity work in this case involves processes that question and fracture the self in order to 'get through' the struggle of performance: a coherent *public expression* of the musical work with others; *expecting and allowing for further 'dilution'*; and *overcoming fears* through expressing and accommodating extreme emotion. So, in summary, the musicians' on-stage performing struggle was one of wanting to be centre stage but not wanting to be on stage, struggling to overcome one's fears when having to perform an unnatural (but 'owned') stage persona. Although in tension with their private or back-stage sense of self, live performance was essential to who they claimed and aspired to be as musicians.

## Discussion

Our aim was to understand what kinds of identity work were going on in the process of self-questioning such as those of the indie musicians, and to gain some insight into how the identity work related to the work practices and context. Our initial observations were that two things appeared to be outside the expectations that might be formed from the literature. First, that the struggles encountered did not seem to be the transitory stimuli for identity work which aimed at achieving a coherent and positive self-identity. Rather, they appeared to be perpetual and not merely a stimulus, but part of the actual identity of being an indie musician. Second, even the literature which acknowledges struggle in identity work tends to see the identity work as being self-affirmatory, for example as when making small acts of rebellion against a controlling work setting. In our data, people were not always or only self-affirmatory. Rather, it seemed that these data could connect with Ybema et al.'s (2009) call to explore identity work which includes insecurity, critical and self-depreciative aspects. We will now explore briefly the three different forms of self-questioning identity work in their contexts (as summarized in Table 1), and subsequently we go on to discuss the potential for more general applicability of the idea of self-questioning identity work.

**Table 1.** Three forms of self-questioning identity work.

Work activity and social setting	Processes of struggle contributing to identity work	Identity-in-the-work	Self-questioning identity work
<i>Solo song writing</i>	Expressing difficult emotions	Authoring and critiquing a narration of an imperfect self in song	Exploring and critiquing the self in the production of authentic but flawed artistic expression
<i>Self alone</i>	Reaching into 'uncomfortable' parts of the self  Striving (and failing) for perfectly authentic creativity		Seeking out the limits of the self, emotionally as well as creatively, and simultaneously claiming and critiquing aspects of identity
<i>Arranging music and practising with a band</i>	Letting others have an authoring/editing role in self-expression	Exposition of self-narration	Expressing the self with close-others
<i>Self collaborating with/leading close-others</i>	Allowing for 'dilution' Accepting that 'dilution'/collaboration may be an improvement of the work	Inclusion of the 'signatures' of others (e.g. solos, riffs, arrangements, etc.)	Interactions based on contrast and multiple-authoring  Despite a felt loss of control, going beyond the limits of the self, by developing and contrasting stances to others, that are somehow seen as necessary and connected parts of the self over time
<i>Live public performance</i>	Public expression of self in which others perform part of the expression	Projection of the mediated narrative of self to an audience which can approve/disapprove	Both owning and questioning the versions of self that exist in a (potentially) fracturing environment
<i>Self, with close-others, performing to distant-others</i>	Expectation of further 'dilution'  Overcoming fears of exposure and rejection		Letting go of the 'authoring' of the self through extreme emotional release  Despite resistance and even disgust, developing separate persona(e) that are still 'owned' by the self and essential to the fulfilment of the project of the self

Being alone and writing songs is a first domain that produced tensions and challenges of reaching into the 'dark places' of the self, self-questioning through exploring difficult emotions, for example those associated with romantic break-ups. Further, there were difficult decisions about how much to reveal. There was a desire to be 'authentic' and genuinely express the emotions, but this increased the potential vulnerability of the songwriter. Hence there was self-questioning identity work in choosing and editing the self-narration and adopting musical styles. The social context was normally the musician working alone; however, when song writing, the musicians were also aware that they would have to take the song to the band, and so the band as an audience as well as their abilities and the instruments they played had an impact on the writing and the form of self-expression.

Taking a song into the band setting was often an ambivalent experience. Many songwriters felt very close to their key band members and there were numerous stories of band members helping songwriters get through crises of confidence and personal difficulties as well as sharing in moments of excitement and creativity. However, for the songwriters there were often challenges and tensions relating to a fear of 'dilution'. This meant taking a song that they felt was 'authentic' and allowing others to have an impact on it. Band members, however, were engaged in their own identity-in-the-work. They often had particular styles, types of solos, riffs or forms of harmony that they became known for. These were part of their identity as a player and had a practical impact on their employment as they were sought out by other songwriters and producers for their particular skill. Hence, in this work activity there were multiple identities-in-the-work, fostering self-questioning identity work that included a degree of negotiation between needing or desiring to be part of a band and remaining loyal to one's own authentic self-expression.

Playing live introduces new struggles and uncertainties such as the potential for mistakes or audience misperception leading to a song's personal meaning being diverted. The identity-in-the-work is multiple with stage presentation, the roles of the band and the setting all playing a part alongside the actual song. Although many audience members felt very connected to the musicians, they were 'distant-others' because of the largely non-dialogical form of interaction. As an audience, however, they had an impact on the songwriters' ongoing struggle to be self-legitimate as a performing musician. Many musicians, even though very experienced, were anxious around performance, and yet it was also something that they were strongly drawn to. The fear of exposure and rejection was balanced by the hope for acceptance and praise. The self-questioning identity work included asking what version of self and self-in-the-work is enacted in the presentation of their staged persona.

Although we have presented these as separate categories, it is also clear that they impact on each other. For example, an audience reaction can strongly influence the confidence with which a songwriter embarks on their next writing project. The reactions and contributions of band members, who themselves are engaged in identity-in-the-work and identity work, can influence ideas about how to construct a song and whose strengths to play to (or not). This means that there are multiple challenges and dynamic tensions in each of the work activities and social settings of work. As a result the musicians are engaged in ongoing struggles which are unlikely ever to be resolved because the struggles associated with one activity cycle into others in the experience, memory and imagination that the songwriter brings to the next activity. In part, this process relates to risk, which increases with the degree of exposure to close- and distant-others. However,

because the settings influence each other, the risk of exposure to the audience is foreshadowed in writing and band-playing. Hence, the identity-in-the-work, even when writing the song, may contain some of the songwriter's emotions about public performance. These processual struggles are inherent to being an indie musician.

This study thus calls into question prevalent conceptualizations of identity work which present people's identity struggles as transitory and teleological; as the road people travel in their search for a secure sense of self. At best, current literature considers the dark and difficult places that people visit in their self-reflections as instrumental to the creation of a sense of coherence. For indie musicians, however, their self-questioning was ongoing and unresolved; it was not a means to an end; it was an end in itself. They did not 'work' on their identities to achieve coherence and consistency; it was an inherent part of their notion of who they were and how their work was to be achieved, alone and with others. Drawing on Romantic ideals (Hoedemaekers and Ybema, 2015), they framed themselves as tortured artists for whom writing, arranging and performing music required them to heroically conquer artistic depressions, difficult band-work or stage fright. By identifying themselves this way, perhaps at a meta-level, indie musicians did achieve a degree of coherence in their conception of who they were. In a way, identity struggles then constitute, maybe not a route towards resolution, but an absorption into the self. To achieve this, struggling is at the heart of their identity work. This article thus suggests that the identities actors take on or aspire to may not simply be the solution to a problem; they can be problematic in themselves or create problems of their own, obliging people to keep working on, and question their 'selves'. The musicians could remove themselves from these contexts, but that would be to stop being an indie musician.

In general, we found that some questions are posed by oneself or by close-others; others occur because the distance of the audience is the provocation, but all occur because of a degree of identity-in-the-work. Further inquiry into situations in which people invest their sense of self into their work, put forward claims of authentic self-expression to increase reputation and have team working and public performance as part of their evaluation of self could extend our understanding of the nature of identity work when people or their work become unsettled, socially invalidated or even stigmatized. Thus the ideas developed here may relate particularly to occupations where there is overt 'identity-in-the-work' in a number of ways, and our work sheds new light on a number of existing studies in this area. Beyond indie musicians, this may apply to many areas of art and design (see Bain, 2005; Elsbach, 2009) in which something of the self is on display. Self-questioning identity work may be heightened when teamwork is involved as this could lead to compromises or, as in our findings, a fear of 'dilution' of the expression of self. This might occur in creative work or in other occupations, for example in professional sport (see Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012). Similarly, other occupations in which there is a public or semi-public performance could also stimulate self-questioning identity work. This could include knowledge-based jobs in which the acquisition, display and public use of knowledge are perceived to be part of who the person is, such as medical professionals, lawyers and consultants (see Costas and Fleming, 2009) and academics (see Knights and Clarke, 2014). In addition, there are occupations where self-questioning identity work may be a way of being (as it was for the indie musicians in our study), such as religious ministers (see Kreiner et al., 2006). Lastly, situations of job insecurity and

career transitions (Beech, 2011; Hoyer and Steyaert, 2015) might also spark self-questioning identity work of the kind characterized in our study.

Methodologically we might expect organizational actors to engage more in self-questioning identity work if and when researchers invest time and energy into entering the backstages, engaging in informal conversations and establishing rapport with research participants. When research is based on one-off interviews, it may well be that self-doubt, antagonisms, inconsistencies and self-critique are less revealed, and so self-questioning may be more frequent in, and central to, people's identity work, than has been noted to date. Future research into identity work could explore further the dark, dramatic or difficult dimensions of people's self-reflexivity. As dominant conceptions direct attention towards people's pursuit of coherence, we suggest conceiving identity work as people's ongoing efforts to create, confirm *and disrupt* a sense of self.

## Funding

This article is based on data from a research study financially supported by the ESRC [RES-331-27-0065].

## References

- Alvesson M (2010) Self-doubters, strugglers, storytellers and others: images of self-identities in organizational studies. *Human Relations* 63(2): 193–217.
- Alvesson M and Willmott H (2002) Identity regulation as organizational control: producing the appropriate individual. *Journal of Management Studies* 39(5): 619–44.
- Bain A (2005) Constructing an artistic identity. *Work, Employment and Society* 19(1): 25–46.
- Beech N (2011) Liminality and the practices of identity reconstruction. *Human Relations* 64(2): 285–302.
- Blackler F, Crump N and McDonald S (2000) Organizing processes in complex activity networks. *Organization* 7(2): 277–300.
- Brown AD (2015) Identities and identity work in organizations. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 17(1): 20–40.
- Collinson DL (2003) Identities and insecurities: selves at work. *Organization* 10(3): 527–47.
- Corbin JM and Strauss A (2008) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (3rd edn). London: SAGE.
- Costas J and Fleming P (2009) Beyond dis-identification. *Human Relations* 63(3): 353–78.
- Coulson S (2012) Collaborating in a competitive world: musicians' working lives and understandings of entrepreneurship. *Work, Employment and Society* 26(2): 246–61.
- Cunliffe A and Coupland C (2012) From hero to villain: making experience sensible through embodied narrative sensemaking. *Human Relations* 65(1): 63–88.
- Denzin NK (1978) *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Dylan B (1983) *I and I. Infidels*.
- Ellis N and Ybema S (2010) Marketing identities: shifting circles of identification in inter-organizational relationships. *Organization Studies* 31(3): 279–305.
- Elsbach KD (2009) Identity affirmation through 'signature style': a study of toy car designers. *Human Relations* 62(7): 1041–72.
- Ezzy D (1998) Theorizing narrative identity. *The Sociological Quarterly* 39(2): 239–52.
- Fonarow W (2006) *Empire of Dirt: The Aesthetics and Rituals of British Indie Music*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.



- Gotsi M, Andriopoulos C, Lewis MW and Ingram AE (2010) Managing creatives: paradoxical approaches to identity regulation. *Human Relations* 63(6): 781–805.
- Grey C (1998) On being professional in a ‘big six’ firm. *Accounting, Organization and Society* 23(5–6): 569–87.
- Hartman T (2015) ‘Strong multiplicity’: an interpretive lens in the analysis of qualitative interview narratives. *Qualitative Research* 15(1): 22–38.
- Hibbert P, Sillince J, Diefenbach T and Cunliffe A (2014) Relationally reflexive practice: a generative approach to theory development in qualitative research. *Organizational Research Methods* 17(3): 278–98.
- Hoedemaekers C and Ybema S (2015) Art, industry and identity struggles. In: Beech N and Gilmore C (eds) *Organising Music: Theory, Practice, Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 172–80.
- Hoyer P and Steyaert C (2015) Narrative identity construction in times of career change: taking note of unconscious desires. *Human Relations* 68(12): 1837–63.
- Humphreys M, Brown AD and Hatch MJ (2003) Is ethnography jazz? *Organization* 10(1): 5–31.
- Knights D and Clarke C (2014) It’s a bittersweet symphony, this life: fragile academic selves and insecure identities at work. *Organization Studies* 35(3): 335–57.
- Kreiner GE, Hollensbe EC and Sheep ML (2006) Where is the ‘me’ among the ‘we’? Identity work and the search for optimal balance. *Academy of Management Journal* 49: 1031–57.
- Lee Y and Lin H (2011) ‘Gaming is my work’: identity work in internet-hobbyist game workers. *Work, Employment and Society* 25(3): 451–67.
- McKinlay A and Smith C (2009) *Creative Labour: Working in the Creative Industries*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Montuori A (2003) The complexity of improvisation and the improvisation of complexity. Social science, art, and creativity. *Human Relations* 56(2): 237–55.
- Musson G and Duberley J (2007) Change, change or be exchanged: the discourse of participation and the manufacture of identity. *Journal of Management Studies* 44(1): 143–64.
- Platman K (2004) ‘Portfolio careers’ and the search for flexibility in later life. *Work, Employment and Society* 18(3): 573–99.
- Sveningsson S and Alvesson M (2003) Managing managerial identities. *Human Relations* 56(10): 1163–93.
- Watson TJ (2008) Managing identity: identity work, personal predicaments and structural circumstances. *Organization* 15(1): 121–43.
- Watson T (2009) Narrative, life story and manager identity: a case study in autobiographical identity work. *Human Relations* 62(3): 425–52.
- Wesley JK (2002) Growing up sexualized: issues of power and violence in the lives of female exotic dancers. *Violence against Women* 8(10): 1182–207.
- Ybema S, Keenoy T, Oswick C, Beverungen A, Ellis N and Sabelis I (2009) Articulating identities. *Human Relations* 63(3): 299–322.

**Nic Beech** is a Vice Principal of the University of Dundee and oversees strategic planning, academic leadership, staffing and resources. He previously held the role of Vice Principal at the University of St Andrews and is Chair of the British Academy of Management. His research interests are in change, liminality, paradox and the construction of identity in creative industries (particularly music) and health care.

**Charlotte Gilmore** is a Chancellor’s Fellow at the University of Edinburgh. Her area of interest is the cultural and creative industries. Charlotte has researched extensively within the music industry, particularly within contemporary classical music and the indie music scene. She has also explored

artistic and organizational practices within a number of artistic collective communities and advertising agencies. Charlotte's work has been published in *Human Relations*, *Management Learning*, the *British Journal of Management* and co-edited, with Nic Beech, *Organising Music: Theory, Practice and Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

**Paul Hibbert** is Dean of the Faculties Arts and Divinity and Professor of Management at the University of St Andrews. His research is principally concerned with collaborative and relational processes of organizing and learning, and is published in leading international journals. His pedagogic interests focus on reflective and reflexive practice and critical approaches to education, especially in relation to management studies.

**Sierk Ybema** is Associate Professor in the Department of Organization Sciences at VU University Amsterdam. His research centres on processes of politics, identity and meaning-making, with empirical settings ranging from amusement parks to newspaper offices, and from multinational corporations to health care institutions. He has published on culture and conflict, relational and temporal identity talk, managerial discourse and 'postalgia', intercultural communications, inter-organizational relationships and organizational change and crisis.

**Date submitted** April 2014

**Date accepted** November 2015